Has commemoration always been this hyper-partisan?

Historical commemoration was, once again, a hot topic at Congress this year, and with good reason. Less than a year after the federal government unveiled its War of 1812 monument on Parliament Hill, work is already underway in downtown Ottawa for a new National Holocaust Monument and a Memorial to the Victims of Communism. The latter's political nature is hard to miss – as a means to condemn the left in general, as an attempt to appeal to Ethno-Cultural voters who lived through communist regimes, and to permanently entrench, both literally and figuratively, conservative and free-market capitalist values in the nation's capital. Architects, locals, Ottawa City Council, and even the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada have all voiced their dismay.

It was fitting, then, that the annual meeting opened with a special roundtable entitled "Commemorations in the National Capital Region," organized and hosted by Yves Frenette (Université de Saint-Boniface) at Ottawa's City Hall. The discussants agreed that commemoration, past and present, is inherently political. Alan Gordon (University of Guelph) underscored the important role that partisanship has historically played in both living commemoration (ceremonies and celebrations) and physical commemoration (monuments and memorials). Alain Roy (Library and Archives Canada), focusing on physical commemoration in Ottawa-Gatineau since Confederation, explained that monuments have been especially political because of the belief that they lend permanence to a desired version of the past.

But has commemoration always been so viscerally political, as it appears to be today? On this, the discussants were less certain. Nadine Blumer (Concordia University) pointed out that debate around the Holocaust memorial had been surprisingly lacking. Alain Roy, however, noted that more than half of the monuments in Ottawa-Gatineau have been built since the 1990s. To me, this suggests an intensification in the contest between the governing Liberal and Conservative parties' conceptualizations of the nation. David Aitkin (Sun Media), a journalist who has travelled in Stephen Harper's media entourage, agreed that commemoration appears to be more partisan than in the past. There seemed, in Aitkin's view, a perception among officials close to Harper that if local Ottawans opposed the anti-communism monument, then the government must be getting something right! The political controversy won't end there – not with 2017 around the corner ….

It bears reflecting, then, upon a previous commemoration of Confederation: Canada's first big Dominion Day bash, the 1927 Diamond Jubilee of Confederation. In my own research of this event, I have found that the Diamond Jubilee was, in some respects, surprisingly non-partisan (or at least multi-partisan). Liberal Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King decided early on that organization of the event should be left to an independent committee of parliamentarians and prominent citizens. The makeup of the committee was decided following a rather collegial discussion in the House of Commons and after talks between King and Conservative Leader of the Opposition Hugh Guthrie. The committee ultimately included representatives from all three major political parties at the time (Liberals, Conservatives, and Progressives) as well as non-partisan individuals from various social clubs, business groups, academic and educational associations, labour organizations, and others. This diverse group worked surprisingly well together, organizing what turned out to be a highly successful event within a very short timeframe.

The multi-partisan nature of the official Diamond Jubilee celebrations was made visible in a number of ways. Commemorative stamps for the event portrayed statesmen from historical Liberal and Conservative governments, specially commissioned history articles featured individuals from both of the old parties, and memorial plaques were put up at the childhood homes of the country's most beloved Conservative and Liberal prime ministers, John A. Macdonald and Wilfrid Laurier. On July 1st on Parliament Hill, amidst a variety of musical performances and historical pageantry, politicians from both the governing and opposition parties shared the stage and took turns giving feel-good speeches about Canada, its past, and its future.

To suggest that the Diamond Jubilee was apolitical would be ahistorical. For King, agreeing to put on the celebrations was a no-brainer. Not only would the feel-good event potentially boost his government's image, but the anniversary's nationalistic undertones could also serve to promote acceptance of the Liberals' autonomist agenda, especially in the wake of the controversial King-Byng Affair and Balfour Declaration of the previous year.

Still, from a 21st-century hindsight, the conscious attempt to avoid an overly partisan celebration in 1927 is striking, even admirable. In 1927, the organizing committee was independent and relatively non-partisan, established in partnership between the governing and opposition parties. In the lead-up to 2017, the government has thus far refused the opposition parties' request to establish an independent organizing commission. In 1927, Prime Minister King shared the stage with Leader of the Opposition Hugh Guthrie. In 2015, Stephen Harper was the only party leader allowed to give a Canada Day speech on Parliament Hill. For 2017, it remains to be seen. But wouldn't it be a refreshing sight to see all of the party leaders sharing the same mic on Canada's 150th? Or, better yet … how about none at all!

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